

Case Studies on Omoiyari Management in Japanese Hospitality: Service, Hospitality, and Omotenashi Perspectives

Shunichiro Morishita

Department of Tourism Faculty of Collaborative Regional Development, Kyushu Sangyo University, Fukuoka, Japan
Email: s.morish@ip.kyusan-u.ac.jp (S.M.)

Abstract—In Japan, the small-scale lodging industry implements *omoiyari*, the familial service unique to low-price Japanese-style traditional inns (*ryokan*). *Omoiyari* may appeal to customers in a way that *omotenashi* (Japanese hospitality) in luxury *ryokan* and hotels worldwide cannot. This study analyzes *omoiyari* management through case studies of four small inns in Japan and organizes the Japanese lodging industry along two axes: low/high price and global/Japanese local. *Omoiyari* is the home-like hospitality of low-price Japanese local inns considered absent in the characteristics of service, hospitality, and *omotenashi*. Field surveys and interviews with four inns known for their thoughtful *omoiyari* indicated three common characteristics: 1) use and renovation of old Japanese-style rooms and facilities, 2) experience of traditional Japanese culture, seasonal events, local life, and nature, and 3) familial hospitality without excessive service. The study concludes that the *omoiyari* in *ryokan* rooted in their local communities attracts guests by exceeding their expectations.

Keywords—*omoiyari*, small-scale lodging industry, service, hospitality, *omotenashi*

I. INTRODUCTION

Omotenashi denotes the unique Japanese hospitality that is highly favored among tourists. *Omotenashi* differs from the hospitality of global luxury hotels and services of economical business hotels, respectively. *Omotenashi* is rooted in traditional Japanese culture and customs and is a key experience at luxury *ryokan* (Japanese-style traditional inns) and high-class *ryotei* (Japanese-style luxury traditional restaurants). *Omotenashi* aims to please guests and can be found in various lodging businesses in Japan. Conversely, although the customer-oriented feeling is the same, the hospitality of a \$1,000/night in luxury *ryokan* differs from that of a \$100/night in economical Japanese inns. In this study, I define *omoiyari* as the familial service of economical Japanese inns (i.e., low-price *ryokan* that charge less than \$100 per night with meals). Although *omoiyari* has been discussed as a uniquely Japanese trait (Longhurst and Niimi, 2020), it is not defined specifically for service in the Japanese lodging industry. Therefore, this study defines and

clarifies *omoiyari* using four case studies in the Japanese lodging industry. In Japan, several popular low-price *ryokans* have gained excellent reputations owing to their thoughtful *omoiyari*. By analyzing management cases of *omoiyari* at such inns, this study will determine the characteristics of *omoiyari* management. Furthermore, by comparing the concepts of the “hospitality” of a global hotel chain that allows guests to feel at ease and relaxed anywhere in the world, the “service” of a reasonable business hotel that eliminates excessive and pursues economic efficiency, and the *omotenashi* of a luxury *ryokan* that evokes traditional Japanese hospitality and culture. My results indicate that *omoiyari* can provide a competitive advantage for low-price *ryokan*.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: SERVICE, HOSPITABILITY, AND OMOTENASHI

In the Japanese lodging industry, services, including hospitality and *omotenashi*, are categorized into two perspectives as shown in Fig. 1: low/high price (“service” in economical business hotels, hospitality in upscale global hotel chains) and global/Japanese local (*omotenashi* in high-end traditional *ryokan* and the *omoiyari* of low-price, family-run small Japanese inns).

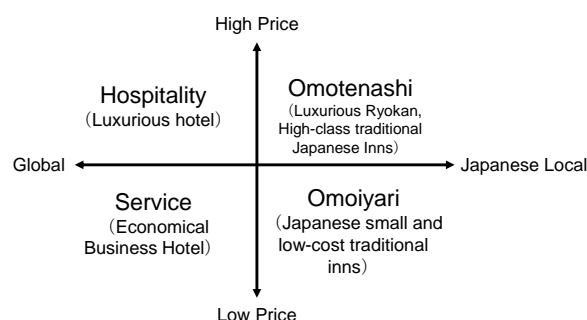


Fig. 1. Types of services in the Japanese lodging industry.

Although *omoiyari* is a new concept proposed in this study, service, hospitality, and *omotenashi* have been discussed in the following studies.

A. Service

Service is defined as “a particular type of help or work that is provided by a business to customers, but not one

that involves producing goods” (Longman online dictionary¹). Generally, service refers to an occupational activity performed in exchange for some form of compensation. Services are designed to provide the same standard activity to a large number of customers; most service providers have limited time and opportunity to interact with customers and cannot perform additional activities at the discretion of individual employees. Notably, some customers do not want a close relationship with service providers and prefer quick and efficient service. Therefore, management strives to provide standard services efficiently through standardization of operations and tasks, manualization, and system construction (Ito *et al.*, 2010). Services are characterized by the rational and efficient provision of basic value commensurate with compensation within limited resources to satisfy a large number of customers.

B. Hospitality

Definitions of “hospitality” such as “services such as food and drink that an organization provides for guests at a special event” (Longman online dictionary¹) often allude to the industrial aspect in the lodging and restaurant business. In recent years, the term “hospitality” has been used extensively in everyday life, especially in the tourism industry, and these businesses are collectively considered as the hospitality industry. “Hospitality” was considered a free social action beyond economic activities, originating from voluntary and free actions of people in entertaining their guests (Maeda and Isamu 2007). For example, a guest being invited to eat at their friend’s house is an act based on “hospitality” and is not considered a business transaction. Consequently, hospitality is considered a reciprocal and equal relationship between the provider and customer; conversely, in services, a master-servant relationship is assumed wherein the customer is served by the provider (Hattori and Katsuto, 2009). Unlike services intended to provide the same activity to a large number of customers, hospitality requires different responses for individual customers. Furthermore, hospitality exceeds services providing basic values that meet price-appropriate criteria and conditions and also requires the provision of added value according to the specific situation, expectations, and needs and wants of individual customers (Tateno and Matsumoto, 2013). Hospitality is characterized by value creation beyond service and customer satisfaction by proactively providing responses that exceed the expectations of customers according to their requests, especially among American or European customers who often express their requests explicitly (Chen and Satomi, 2014).

C. Omotenashi

Omotenashi is characterized by the fact that providers discreetly identify the unspoken requests of the Japanese customer based on situation and context, unlike the more direct approaches employed in hospitality (Hara and Yoshinori, 2018). Obtaining implicit requests through

dialog with guests and providing *omotenashi* appropriate to the time and place is considered value-added. To infer requests not expressed by the customers like Japanese people, both the staff and customers must share implicit context and values, such as customary and rules rooted in Japanese history and traditional culture (Kobayashi and Kiyoshi, 2015). *Omotenashi* contains emotional qualities unique to Japanese people and inherent in Japanese culture, such as “modesty”, “casualness”, “cooperation”, and “reserve for others” (Terasaka and Yushi, 2014). *Omotenashi* depends on individual customers and situations and may be required under unpredictable circumstances. To provide appropriate *omotenashi*, observational skills are required to empathize with customers and anticipate needs (Fukushima and Noriko, 2015). Hence, sensitivity and cultivation of the customer on the receiving end of *omotenashi* and the trust between the host and customer (Ueda and Hiroshi, 2011) are important. While *omotenashi* has prioritized sustainability over business expansion and has developed in suited to the Japanese environment, it may not be oriented toward expansion of scale and has characteristics that make adapting to globalization difficult.

The characteristics of service, hospitality, and *omotenashi* can be summarized as follows. Global, low-price “service” uniformly pursues standardization and efficiency for large numbers of customers. Global, high price “hospitality” provides value-added pleasure and excitement beyond the customer’s needs or service. Japanese local, high price *omotenashi* is rooted in traditional Japanese culture and customs and is provided according to the customer’s implicit needs. Hence, what are the characteristics of the low-price Japanese local service, *omoiyari*? I will determine the characteristics from case studies of four Japanese low-cost *ryokans* that have received great feedback for thoughtful service, *omoiyari*.

III. EXAMPLES OF OMOIYARI MANAGEMENT IN SMALL-SCALE JAPANESE INNS

This chapter examines the characteristics of *omoiyari* through case studies of four Japanese small inns: Ryokan Sawanoya, Fuji Hakone Guest House, Kyomachiya Rakuyu Horikawa Gojo, and Shiraho Friend House. These cases were selected because, despite costing less than \$100 per night, these inns are renowned for their excellent service and have the highest customer satisfaction ratings in the region. The main question is: What distinctive services do they offer to their customers? I interviewed owners or managers of these inns and conducted a field survey, focusing on their thoughts toward their guests and management by *omoiyari*.

A. Ryokan Sawanoya

Sawanoya (Ryokan Sawanoya) in Tokyo is a three-story reinforced concrete building opened in 1968. Sawanoya has a capacity of 13 guest rooms for 22 people and, in 2009, was remodeled to have a Japanese *ryokan*-like entrance. As a traditional Japanese inn, *ryokan*, Sawanoya’s rooms are typical Japanese-style rooms with

¹ <https://global.longmandictionaries.com/> (October 17, 2022 access)

tatami mats and several shared baths, and the Japanese cypress and ceramic baths are especially popular. The local area surrounding Sawanoya has many traditional restaurants and *izakaya* (Japanese-style pubs), and interaction with the local people through eating and drinking is also an attraction. Sawanoya holds traditional Japanese events such as New Year's, *Setsubun* (last day of winter in the traditional Japanese calendar), Girls' Festival, May dolls and carp streamers, iris bath, *Tanabata* (Star Festival), and *yuzu* (citron) bath. With help from local volunteers, Sawanoya performs *shishi-mai* (New Year's lion dances), tea ceremonies, English *rakugo* (traditional Japanese comic storytelling) performances, and *shamisen* (three-stringed Japanese guitar) performances for guests. Moreover, the event encourages guests to participate in local festivals and neighborhood events such as carrying *mikoshi* (portable shrine carried in festivals), cherry blossom viewing, chrysanthemum dolls, and *Bon* (tray) festival dancing. Sawanoya has limited front desk and bathing hours and does not provide excessive services to its guests, with its facilities consisting old Japanese-style rooms and shared baths. However, it values knowing its guests, and if they have any problems, it will respond in a friendly, familial atmosphere. Homepage of Ryokan Sawanoya is shown as Fig. 2.



Fig. 2. Ryokan Sawanoya².

B. Fuji Hakone Guest House

Fuji Hakone Guest House has 14 rooms comprising a one-story building and two-story buildings and opened in Hakone, Kanagawa, in 1984 by expanding and remodeling the owner's residence. The motto of Fuji Hakone Guest House is "Welcome guests as friends and take care of them as people". It has Japanese-style rooms with *tatami* mats, sliding doors, and *shoji* screens with shared bath and toilet facilities. Fuji Hakone Guest House has a lounge wherein guests can communicate with each other and learning about the local area and culture. In the lounge, staff and local volunteers conduct lectures and performances on Japanese culture (e.g., *origami* (paper folding), Japanese tea ceremony, and *kendo* (Japanese

fencing)) to guests from Japan and abroad. Fuji Hakone Guest House positions itself as an inn for international, cultural, and educational exchanges, unlike hotels and luxury *ryokan*, and strives to be considerate to make both guests and the community happy. Fuji Hakone Guest House reduces unnecessary services to minimize accommodation costs and by offering a helping hand and full support to those in need, just as a person would to their own friends. The guesthouse has gained the trust of its guests and has become an inn that attracts guests through word of mouth. The Fuji Hakone Guest House is shown in Fig. 3.



Fig 3. Fuji Hakone Guest House³.

C. Kyomachiya Rakuyu Hakone Goji

Rakuyu (Kyomachiya Rakuyu Horikawa Gojo) is a two-story wooden inn with 11 rooms that was established in 2016 by recreating a traditional Kyoto machiya (Japanese-style traditional townhouse). Rakuyu's rooms are small and traditional *tatami*-mat, Japanese-style rooms with a table and cushions, *futons*, and *samue* (Japanese work clothes) in the closet, and a doorway height of about 180 cm, reminiscent an old Kyoto townhouse. Rakuyu hopes their guests will experience real life in Kyoto. For example, the breakfast menu includes Kyoto's famous pickles, bread from a famous local bakery, *dashimaki tamago* (rolled egg), rice, and miso soup. Across the street from Rakuyu is a public bath, and Rakuyu provides free tickets to those wishing to take the bath. For those interested in the public bathhouse but are apprehensive about entering, a staff may take them to the entrance of the bathhouse. At Rakuyu, guests eat breakfast in a Japanese-style room in a traditional Kyoto townhouse, which has been faithfully reproduced. Moreover, in the morning, they eat breakfast consisting mainly of Kyoto's local specialties. Rakuyu's guests can stay in Kyoto as if they were living in the city, and if guests have any problems, staff will help them. Rakuyu's casual charm has established its reputation as a safe place to stay and enjoy Kyoto. Kyomachiya Rakuyu Horikawa Gojo is shown in Fig. 4.

² Homepage of Ryokan Sawanoya (<http://www.sawanoya.com/index.html>) October 17, 2022 access. The author visited Ryokan Sawanoya on November 14, 2020 and interviewed Isao Sawa, the representative.

³ Facebook of Fuji Hakone Guest House (<https://ja-jp.facebook.com/fujihakoneguesthouse/>) October 17, 2022 access. The author visited Fuji Hakone Guest House on November 13, 2020 and interviewed the representative, Masami Takahashi and the proprietress.



Fig. 4. Kyomachiya Rakuyu Horikawa Gojo⁴.

D. Shiraho Friend House

Shiraho Friend House is a small two-story guesthouse with five rooms and is a three-minute walk away from Shiraho Beach, a famous tourist spot on Ishigaki Island, Okinawa. Shiraho Friend House was an old private house converted into an accommodation facility and was opened in 2009, proposing a new way to enjoy island travel for first-time visitors to Ishigaki Island. At Shiraho Friend House, the owner—who is well versed in the nature and tourism of Ishigaki Island—listens to the requests and intentions of the guests and proposes various tours unique to the location. Staffs are considerate enough to talk to guests even if they are not asked. For example, guests may ask for assistance regarding bus routes, and staff informs them of the best way to reach their destinations while providing a timetable. For destinations that are difficult to reach via public transportation, staff introduces them to local car rental agencies that can make reservations on their behalf or drive them to and from their destinations. For guests with food restrictions (e.g., Muslims, vegetarians, and vegans), staff asks them what they can eat and whether they can drink alcohol and then call restaurants that can provide such food. Shiraho Friend Houses may provide meals to poor travelers. Shiraho Friend House is a popular lodging house that attracts long-term and repeat guests who adore the owner. Shiraho Friend House is shown in Fig. 5.



Fig. 5. Shiraho Friend House⁵.

IV. DISCUSSION: OMOIYARI MANAGEMENT

This chapter will discuss *omoiyari* and identify common traits among the four small Japanese inns: Sawanoya, Fuji Hakone Guesthouse, Rakuyu, and Shiraho Friend House. Furthermore, I will conceptualize the management of *omoiyari* by comparing it with service, hospitality, and *omotenashi*.

A. Common Traits among the Four Inns

Among the four case studies, common characteristics can be found including 1) use of old facilities, 2) experience of traditional Japanese culture, seasonal events, local life, and nature, and 3) familial hospitality. These four small inns utilize old houses to recreate good old traditional Japanese private homes. Moreover, in terms of experiencing traditional Japanese culture, seasonal events, local life, and nature, e.g., Sawanoya and Fuji Hakone Guest House organize traditional Japanese cultural and seasonal events for their guests, encouraging them to eat at local restaurants and participate in festivals. Rakuyu allows guests experience daily life in Kyoto. Shiraho Friends House allows guests enjoy the nature of Ishigaki Island. For the warm reception by familial hospitality, all four inns value the sense of *omoiyari* and serve guests in an informal manner, as if letting friends and relatives stay at their own homes rather than getting customers to stay as a business. Moreover, they share the same attitude of taking good care of each guest and helping them when they are in need. The *omoiyari* of the four inns' cases is appealing not only because of the familial service but also the enjoyment of an extraordinary experience unique to the local area, culture, and nature by staying at a traditional Japanese inn and the thoughtfulness and kindness of the staff willing to assist guests in any way possible if they are in need.

B. Characteristics of Omoiyari

Omoiyari denotes familial service or hospitality, such as unpretentious reception like Japanese old-fashioned families welcoming distant relatives and friends. In these small inns, guests are relaxed and spend their time freely and receive friendly and intimate help if they encounter any problems. This type of staying experience unique to Japanese traditional family-run inns differs from the refined hospitality of a luxury hotel, the reverent *omotenashi* of a luxury Japanese *ryokan*, or the inadequate service of an economical business hotel and may be considered an attraction that exceeds the mere lodging function. *Omoiyari* means treating guests as friends and not customers, with staff and managers exhibiting considerable friendliness and thoughtfulness. In Japanese inns, owners or managers share their desire to please their guests with their staff and continuously improve their *omoiyari* through trial and error based on personally communicating with and gathering feedback from guests. Staff acquires tacit knowledge of *omoiyari* through experience and dialog with guests. Knowledge is transferred and shared among staff and becomes routine, even if this is not formalized in manuals or other forms of explicit knowledge. Thoughtful *omoiyari* becomes

⁴ Facebook of Kyomachiya Rakuyu Horikawa Gojo(<https://ja-jp.facebook.com/luck.you.kyoto/>) October 17, 2022 access. The author visited Kyomachiya Rakuyu Horikawa Gojo on June 17, 2022 and interviewed the manager, Shizuka Yamada.

⁵ Homepage of Shiraho Friend House(<http://okinawa-ishigaki.jp/shiraho-friends-house/>) October 17, 2022 access. The author visited Shiraho Friend House on July 1, 2022 and interviewed the owner, Hiroaki Yamada.

valuable to guests and is difficult to imitate or replace and can become a sustainable competitive advantage. Unlike large-scale hotels and *ryokans*, the *omoiyari* of small *ryokans* is not intended for attracting numerous guests or business expansion and, hence, can be managed from a long-term perspective based on a philosophy. Honest *omoiyari*, wanting to please guests, rather than competing with others, will result in a unique, home-like compassion that cannot be found anywhere else.

C. Comparison of Omoiyari with Service, Hospitality and Omotenashi

Table I summarizes the comparison between *omoiyari* and service, hospitality, and *omotenashi*.

TABLE I. COMPARISON OF OMOIYARI WITH SERVICE, HOSPITALITY AND OMOTENASHI

	Same characteristics as “Omoiyari”	Difference characteristics as “Omoiyari”
Service	Simplified hospitality that doesn't cost money	Standardization and efficiency
Hospitality	Accepting all kinds of people	Globalization and business expansion
Omotenashi	Japanese culture and values as a base	Attentive and reverent treatment

Both service and Japanese home-like *omoiyari* both feature economical and simple activities. Service of economical business hotels eliminate excessive services, specialize in activities necessary for lodging, and aim to improve profitability and business expansion through standardization and efficiency. *Omoiyari* of many small *ryokans* is forced to simplify their service to provide sufficient activities with a small number of workers in an old facility. While service in many business hotels is manualized and formulaic, the *omoiyari* of small *ryokans* differs in that it often involves a home-like treatment that cannot be formally learned. Hospitality and *omoiyari* both aim to accommodate all guests. Worldwide, luxury hotel chains give warm welcomes to guests from all countries, cultures, and values, facilitating their expansion through globalization. Small *ryokans*, too, attempt to accommodate the various needs of their guests to the best of their ability. However, high-class hotels always aim to exceed—intending to impress and surprise—their guests' expectations. Conversely, the *omoiyari* of small Japanese inns, *ryokan*, is more familial, casual, and warm and aims to make guests feel at ease. *Omotenashi* and *omoiyari* are both unique to Japanese hospitality. *Omotenashi* and *omoiyari* are both rooted in traditional Japanese culture, customs, and values. *Omotenashi* is a detailed and intimate treatment and is based on the understanding of the needs of Japanese guests who do not specify their requests, while considering what guests would like to do freely. In this case, *omotenashi* is possible as both the host and the guests share identical Japanese customs and values. Even in small Japanese inns, *ryokan*, they observe and understand guests' difficulties and wholeheartedly assist their guests.

Omotenashi differs in that it is reverent, respectful, and dignified, comparable to high-class *ryokan*. Conversely, the *omoiyari* of small *ryokans* is warm, cozy, and friendly, leaves nothing to chance, and is not overly involved.

Hence, for Japanese small lodging businesses with limited financial resources, extensive renovations or investments in facilities are unnecessary. Small *ryokans* derive their appeal from the homeliness and friendliness exemplified by their *omoiyari* for guests. Central to these efforts is a sense of *omoiyari* that accepts guests as if they were friends or distant relatives. *Omoiyari* varies depending on the ideas of the staff, owner, or manager and can be a unique characteristic of the inn. The inns involved in the four cases welcomed guests as if they were friends or relatives and endeavored to eliminate inconveniences and complaints of guests. Therefore, the inns have become reputable places where guests can unwind.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has discussed *omoiyari*, a unique and home-like service for Japanese small lodging businesses, by presenting the cases of four inns. Unlike the impeccable service of economical business hotels, universally satisfying hospitality of global hotel chains, and reverent *omotenashi* of luxury *ryokan*, the appeal of *omoiyari* lies in the warmth and comfort of being at a friend's or relative's old, local community-attached Japanese house and unpretentious, home-like hospitality. The charm of the small low-price *ryokan* is the warm and relaxing feeling of being at a friend's or relative's home. Every low-price *ryokan* offers a different version of *omoiyari* according to the ideas of its manager, which can serve as a defining characteristic of the inns.

However, this study only provided a conceptual presentation of the findings from interviews and field surveys of four case studies of Japanese small inns managed with *omoiyari*. Future studies may continue analyzing more case studies of inns with good reputations to determine more concrete and practical guidelines. Moreover, systematic and theoretical approaches can be used to determine how small *ryokans*, many of which have difficult business conditions, can manage *omoiyari* and attract guests.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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